

USNS MERCY: SAVING LIVES, RESTORING HOPE, SPREADING GOODWILL

By Admiral Gary Roughead, Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet

Last year there was an immense international response to the incomprehensible destruction in South Asia and Southeast Asia caused by the December 2004 tsunami. Many NGOs, the militaries of 21 nations, hundreds of airplanes, helicopters and ships delivered over 25 million pounds of relief supplies in approximately six weeks. For the U.S. military, it was our largest relief operation since the Berlin airlift and our biggest involvement in Southeast Asia since Vietnam.

At its peak, about 15,000 U.S. troops were involved in the tsunami relief effort. This effort epitomized the generosity and the responsiveness of the American government and the American people, and that of the global community. Our respective armed forces joined with numerous nongovernmental organizations to provide assistance. Our efforts did not merely highlight the importance of our collective sea power, but they also served to demonstrate what is achievable when we all work together for the betterment of the human condition.

The U.S. Navy, our Department of Defense, and our nation support humanitarian disaster relief, and we have demonstrated repeatedly our commitment to providing that assistance and relief. In the 1990s we put forth a large relief effort in Bangladesh called *Operation Sea Angel*. More recently, we rushed relief to the victims of the devastating earthquake in Pakistan, the tragic mudslides in the Philippines, and a destructive earthquake in Indonesia.

Our rapid humanitarian response in the wake of these natural disasters adds to our ongoing, routine interactions in relief, assistance and community involvement in the Asia-Pacific region. Those activities have always been a part of our naval operations and our port visits to foreign shores. In the longstanding tradition of rendering assistance at sea and from the sea, these activities are an integral part of the U.S. commitment to bring greater security, extend assistance and offer hope to those in need.

The current deployment of the U.S. Navy medical ship, *USNS Mercy*, to four nations of the Asia-Pacific region, is very much in keeping with that tradition. During the five months that *Mercy* will operate in Southeast Asia, the ship will visit the Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh and East Timor. She carries a team of U.S. medical professionals from our Army, our Navy and our Air Force. The ship's helicopters will facilitate and speed the flow of patients. Navy construction engineers, based in Guam, will perform minor construction projects. Representatives of the U.S. public health service will join in. Most noteworthy are the several nongovernmental organizations which will be part of the team. Over the course of *Mercy*'s mission, host nations and non-host nations, including India, Canada, Australia, Singapore, and Malaysia will also contribute medical personnel. Together, they will form an interagency, international and multi-specialized team of medical professionals capable of providing a wide range of medical and health services on and off the ship.

Many will ask why do we do this. The answer is simple – it is who we are as a nation. Caring, compassionate, and generous. Perhaps one of the most telling examples of *Mercy*'s impact and reason for the ship's mission does not come from a military or government spokesperson, but from one of the thousands of people who are benefiting from her good work. The following from the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* tells the story: "It had been only minutes since an American medical relief team at a crumbling Jolo hospital removed the cataracts that had kept Harun in the dark for seven years, but the 60-year-old already was bubbling over with excitement. A Filipino doctor involved in the U.S. mission removed the white gauze bandages and asked if she could see anything. 'Nothing, nothing yet,' she mumbled. The first thing she wanted to see, she said, were 'the faces of the people who did this favor for me.'"

That is what the *Mercy* mission is about.

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Note: A Bangla translation of this article is also available from the American Center. If you are interested in the translation, please call the American Center Press Section (Tel: 8837151-4, Fax: 9881677; e-mail: DhakaPA@state.gov; Website: [http:// dhaka.usembassy.gov](http://dhaka.usembassy.gov)